

**Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East: Making Sense of Libya**      Internatio  
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(...) The character of the Libyan crisis today arises from the complex but so far evidently indecisive impact of the UN-authorized military intervention, now formally led by NATO, in what had already become a civil war. NATO's intervention saved the anti-Qaddafi side from immediate defeat but has not yet resolved the conflict in its favour.

Although the declared rationale of this intervention was to protect civilians, civilians are figuring in large numbers as victims of the war, both as casualties and refugees, while the leading Western governments supporting NATO's campaign make no secret of the fact that their goal is regime change. The country is

*de facto*

being partitioned, as divisions between the predominantly opposition-held east and the predominantly regime-controlled west harden into distinct political, social and economic spheres. As a result, it is virtually impossible for the pro-democracy current of urban public opinion in most of western Libya (and Tripoli in particular) to express itself and weigh in the political balance.

At the same time, the prolonged military campaign and attendant instability present strategic threats to Libya's neighbours. Besides fuelling a large-scale refugee crisis, they are raising the risk of infiltration by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, whose networks of activists are present in Algeria, Mali and Niger. All this, together with mounting bitterness on both sides, will constitute a heavy legacy for any post-Qaddafi government.

Thus the longer Libya's military conflict persists, the more it risks undermining the anti-Qaddafi camp's avowed objectives. Yet, to date, the latter's leadership and their NATO supporters appear to be uninterested in resolving the conflict through negotiation. To insist, as they have done, on Qaddafi's departure as a precondition for any political initiative is to prolong the military conflict and deepen the crisis. Instead, the priority should be to secure an immediate ceasefire and negotiations on a transition to a post-Qaddafi political order. (...)

(...) A political breakthrough is by far the best way out of the costly situation created by the military impasse. This will require a ceasefire, the deployment of a peacekeeping force to monitor and guarantee this under a UN mandate and the immediate opening of serious negotiations between regime and opposition representatives to secure agreement on a peaceful transition to a new, more legitimate political order. Such a breakthrough almost certainly necessitates involvement by a third party or third parties accepted by both sides. A joint political initiative by the Arab League and the African Union – the former viewed more favourably by the opposition, the latter preferred by the regime – is one possibility to lead to such an agreement.

They could build on ongoing efforts by the African Union and the UN Special Envoy, Abdul Ilah Khatib. But no breakthrough can happen without the leadership of the revolt and NATO rethinking their current stance.

Their repeatedly proclaimed demand that “Qaddafi must go” systematically confuses two quite different objectives. To insist that, ultimately, he can have no role in the post-Jamahiriya political order is one thing, and almost certainly reflects the opinion of a majority of Libyans as well as of the outside world. But to insist that he must go now, as the

*precondition*

for any negotiation, including that of a ceasefire, is to render a ceasefire all but impossible and so to maximise the prospect of continued armed conflict. To insist that he both leave the country

*and*

face trial in the International Criminal Court is virtually to ensure that he will stay in Libya to the bitter end and go down fighting.

Only an immediate ceasefire is consistent with the purpose originally claimed for NATO’s intervention, that of protecting civilians. (...)

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